DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 547 CS 011 149

AUTHOR Pace, Ann Jaffe
TITLE Two Thousand Years of Interactive Readers: The Jewish Tradition of Text Study and Commentary.
PUB DATE Dec 92
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (42nd, San Antonio, TX, December 2-5, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Biblical Literature; *Judaism; *Reader Text Relationship; *Reading Processes; *Reading Strategies; Text Structure
IDENTIFIERS *Discourse Communities; Historical Background; *Interactive Reading; Reading Uses; Torah

ABSTRACT

The Jewish tradition of text study and commentary may convey important messages to educators because of its probable inherent interest and for possible recommendations for pedagogical practice that might be suggested by it. Beyond seeking guidance in religious and everyday affairs, the last 2000 years of Torah study reveals a passionate commitment to uncovering, elucidating, and elaborating on the meaning of the written text; and the interactive response which this commitment fostered itself produced later text and commentary. In its broadest sense, "Torah" refers to the whole of the Hebrew Bible and to later texts and commentaries on it. Torah study essentially involves reading the text and responding to it in a social context, usually students with a master teacher. The process was, and is, dynamic and continuous, as well as both timeless and time-bound. Pedagogical implications of the tradition of Torah study include: (1) the value of collaboration where goals are explicit and mutual; (2) a balanced approach between personal response and a text accepted as authoritative; (3) acceptance of multiple points of view, as long as they can be supported by arguments or demonstration; (4) ongoing and intergenerational modeling of appropriate approaches to text; and (5) a continuous development of "text on text," by which commentaries and interpretations of texts become texts to be studied. (Two figures of schematic representations of Torah pages and the first page of the Tractate Berakhot are included.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED353547

Two Thousand Years of Interactive Readers: The Jewish Tradition of Text Study and Commentary

Ann Jaffe Pace

University of Missouri - Kansas City

Running head: Two Thousand Years

Manuscript submitted for publication.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Ann J. Pace
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS011149

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Two Thousand Years of Interactive Readers: The Jewish Tradition of Text Study and Commentary

Even a cursory examination of the 1992 program of the National Reading Conference would reveal an emphasis on certain issues that were not nearly so evident five or ten years ago: themes such as the interactive or transactional nature of reading, the co-construction of meaning or knowledge, the importance of collaborative engagement and the social context for learning, etc. (e.g., Scanlon & Duffy, 1992; Siegel, 1992). While these concerns are certainly important and, perhaps, relatively recent from the perspective of educational research, they are not novel within a broader framework and, indeed, have historical precedents that go back thousands of years. This paper will highlight one of these historical examples -- the Jewish tradition of text study and commentary -- both because of its probable inherent interest and for possible recommendations for current practice that might be suggested by it.

The Jewish tradition of text study and commentary is over 2000 years old. In this paper, the major texts and commentaries involved in this tradition will be outlined, the purposes and general characteristics of Torah study will be reviewed, and then some implications for classroom and personal uses of text today that might be suggested by this tradition will cautiously be offered.

Major Texts and Commentaries

Until fairly recently, the study of Torah was "the dominant religious preoccupation" (Holtz, 1984) of traditional Judaism. for many people, it still is. Such study was undertaken not simply as a duty, or to seek guidance in religious and every day affairs, though it did serve these ends. Beyond these purposes, however, was a passionate commitment to uncovering, elucidating, and elaborating on the meaning of the written text; and the interactive response which this commitment fostered itself produced later text and commentary.

Torah is used in both a narrow and a very broad sense. In its narrower meaning, it refers to the Pentateuch -- the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The remainder of the Hebrew Bible consists of the Writings (Nevi'im) and the Prophets (Ketuvim). Collectively, the Hebrew Bible is referred to as Tanakh, the acronym for the first letters of each of these sections. In its broadest sense, Torah refers to the whole of the Hebrew Bible and to later texts and commentaries on it. These are all part of Torah, since they all relate back to the same basic source. Talmud study, then, is also Torah study.

In traditional Judaism, Torah is viewed as revelation. Again, however, this refers not only to the Mosaic code, but to all possible meanings and interpretations to be derived from it. From this perspective, all meanings were implicitly given at Sinai, and they await discovery -- or, more accurately, rediscovery -- through Torah study. Thus, as Holtz (1984, p.12) emphasizes, in historical Judaism, "... all Jewish study is

Torah and all Torah has the validity of revelation." Further, with a few minor historical exceptions, the Judaic tradition is not a literalist one, in the sense that there is one "right" meaning or interpretation of text. Rather, there are multiple (though "revealed") meanings to be explored and uncovered.

Among the first extant texts, in addition to the Hebrew Bible, are the early translations, which are considered separate texts since any translation implicitly involves interpretation. One, dating from the third to first centuries before the Christian era, is the Greek translation or Septuagint, from which many later translations were made. Other early translations are those into Aramaic, known as the Targums, which are important historically and because Aramaic was the vernacular of most of the Jewish people of Palestine and surrounding areas in the early Christian era.

Centuries before the Christian era, an Oral Law (Torah she-be'al peh) began to develop alongside the Written Law (Torah she-biktav). Although its origins are not known precisely, it clearly evolved in response to the need to clarify, interpret, and supplement the often cryptic prescriptions of the Mosaic code. For example, the Ten Commandments prohibit labor on the Sabbath, but aside from a few specific proscriptions (as those against lighting a fire or plowing), few details are provided. What constituted "labor," then, was a question that had to be addressed. The Oral Law also offered details for practices mentioned, but not specified, in the Written Law, such as the contents of a divorce decree.

Between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.E., the canonization of the Hebrew Bible took place. Once this was completed, the scribes or recorders of the law were faced with the task of sorting out and codifying the Oral Law. Basic methods of midrash halakhah, or interpretation of the law, evolved over these centuries, initiating a tradition that continues until today (Telushkin, 1991). Steinsaltz (1974) describes the practices developed by the scribes as, "methods of learning and deriving halakhah from the biblical texts themselves, reconciling apparent textual contradictions, interpreting enigmatic statements, and analyzing and solving problems through perusal of the text" (p. 15).

At first oral, midrash came to refer both to the process of interpreting sacred text and later, also, to the written records of such compilations. (The largest written collection of Midrash is known as the Midrash Rabbah, compiled between the third and twelfth centuries C.E.) Midrashic literature is of two kinds: halakhah, which concerns civil and religious law; and aggadah, or narratives, parables, and ethical messages (sermons) based on Biblical themes, although it is often difficult to distinguish clearly between the two). A similar distinction applies to the Talmud. The term Talmud (Hebrew for "study") also is used in two ways. It can refer to both of its main sections, the Mishnah and the Gemara, or -- less commonly today -- to the Gemara alone. Goldenberg (1984, p. 131) describes the Mishnah as "the core document of the Talmudic tradition." It resulted from the interaction of a number of historical factors during the first few centuries of the Christian era when Palestine was under Roman

rule. This was the period of the tanna'im (teachers or rabbis, such as Hillel). The destruction of the second Temple in 70 C.E., created the need for a reorganization of religious practice -- one without the Temple and its sacrificial system. Judaism as it is known today is really a product of this rabbinic era. The most famous scholar of this period was Rabbi Akiba, who is credited with systematically organizing the Oral Law (halakhah) into clearly defined units. But it was Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi, at the end of the third century C.E., who gave the Oral Law a written form, the Mishnah.

Rabbi Judah classified subjects of halakhah into six broad categories or "Orders". These are divided into 63 smaller books or tractates. Each tractate is further divided into chapters, and each chapter into mishnayot. The Mishnah, according to Goldenberg, "...is thus the earliest teaching text, the oldest curriculum of Jewish learning in the world today" (1984, p. 131).

Following its compilation, a tradition of commentary and explanation of the Mishnah developed, leading to a new body of Oral Law. These interpretations and commentaries soon became the object of study themselves and collectively came to be known as the Gemara, which is Aramaic for "study". The rabbis cited in the Gemara are known as amora'im ("explainers"). There are two compilations of these commentaries. The earlier, which is known as the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud, was compiled in the first half of the fifth century. The larger, later (by a century or two), and more preeminent collection is the Babylonian

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Talmud, which is considered to be more skillfully prepared and edited.

The medieval period saw the development of authored, running commentaries on biblical text, as well as on the Talmud. Many of the major figures of this period are known by acronyms, such as Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki, who lived in Troyes, France, in the 11th century). Rashi produced commentary on almost all of the Bible and nearly all of the Talmud. Any serious student of Torah or Talmud today would read these texts with Rashi's commentaries at hand. Much of Rashi's commentary consists of the explanation of difficult words or the setting of context for certain ideas. Other commentaries are those by the Tosafot, Rashi's descendants collectively; Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (Spain, 1089-1164); Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, or Nahmanides), in the 13th century, who had a more mystical approach than Rashi; and the logical Maimonides or Rambam. Rambam (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1135-1204) may be the most noted and influential Jewish philosophical theologian of any age (Samuelson, 1984).

The beginning of Jewish printing led to the publication of editions of both the Bible and the Talmud in which portions of the text are surrounded on the same page by various commentaries. In some cases, there are commentaries on commentaries or "supercommentaries." This practice is illustrated in Figures 1 through 3. Figure 1 shows a schematic representation of a page of the Bible which has both Hebrew and Aramaic texts (Targum), surrounded by commentaries. Figure 2 is a reproduction of the first page of the Tractate Berakhot, the beginning of the Mishnah,

while Figure 3 is a schematic representation of that same page.

Torah Study

To give an idea of the purpose of Torah study, Holtz (1984) cites a classic midrashic text, the Seder Eliyahu Zuta (chapter 2):

> "When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel, he gave it only in the form of wheat -- for us to make flour from it, and flax -- to make a garment from it."

Thus to study Torah is to turn wheat into bread and flax into clothing. To Holtz (1984, p. 29), Torah study "...is ultimately about transformation," by which he means that, if left unstudied and untransformed, the written Torah will be of little use.

Torah study essentially involved reading text and responding to it in a social context, usually students with a master teacher. Solitary study was not recommended. This reading was not passive, but active and interactive, involving one's whole being. It forced "involvement, passion, and self-reflection" (Holtz, 1984, p. 29). Study "held the challenge," according to Holtz (1984, p. 16) "...of uncovering secret meanings, unheard of explanations, matters of great weight and significance." The text was seen as requiring interpretation, and each generation offered new interpretations based on its concerns and perspectives. The process, then, was -- and is -- dynamic and continuous, as well as both timeless and time-bound. Interpretation, also, could be on several different levels. Among these are peshat, the basic or superficial meaning of a text; remez,

allusions or hints; d'rash, or simple exposition; and sod, mystical interpretation.

Torah study typically began with the reading aloud of a portion of a text, following by examination of commentaries on that portion. (If the Talmud were being studied, the gemara discussing the specific mishnah under study would be read next.) Considerable attention was paid to determining the questions addressed by the commentaries. Attempts would be made to reconcile apparent conflicting views. Creativity and originality per se were not valued, but rather insightful questions and penetrating explanations.

In an interesting dissertation completed at the University of Pennsylvania, Susan Tedmon (1991) examined the chavrusa method of text study in a Jewish high school or yeshiva, with the specific intent of seeing whether this model could offer any guidance for collaborative learning in the secular classroom. Chavrusa learning involves two partners, and the term "chavrusa" applies to both this unit -- the dyad -- and one's partner in it. Considerable care is taken in choosing an appropriate chavrusa partner, one who will complement and challenge the other.

Study in a chavrusa is similar to the pattern described above. The partners read the assigned text aloud, translate it, then examine it and the commentaries on it from a variety of perspectives. The oral reading and discussion seem to be particularly important for they may, in Tedmon's words (1991, p. 64), "...combine, optimally, to make chavrusa learning an all-encompassing event of the senses." Chavrusa learning, then, differs

from other kinds of reading in its explicit use of social interaction to construct meaning from a text.

Implications for Practice

What possible implications may, therefore, be drawn from the Judaic tradition of Torah study for education, generally, and uses of text, more specifically? Tedmon is very cautious about adapting aspects of chavrusa learning superficially and inappropriately. She emphasizes that chavrusa learning -- perhaps by extension, also, most Torah study -- occurs within a highly specific, maybe unique, context, in which the participants are highly motivated, are studying a revered and authoritative text, have seen their method of study modeled by respected others, and are engaged in an activity which is supported and highly valued by the community of which they are a part,

Perhaps these conditions are so specific to this particular context that valid applications to other settings and situations cannot be made. Certainly they are not likely to be duplicated in typical classrooms. Nevertheless, the Jewish tradition of Torah study may convey some important messages.

One is the value of collaboration where goals are explicit and mutual. Otherwise, such collaboration my be artifactual and counter-productive. Another is a balanced approach between personal response and a text accepted as authoritative, a view that acknowledges respect for the text as well as the contributions of informed readers. A third is the acceptance of multiple points of view, as long as they can be supported by argument or demonstration, with no one single "right" interpretation of text. Ongoing and inter-generational modeling of appropriate approaches to text is also

significant, especially the continuous demonstration and use of probing questions directed at a task accepted as mutually important. Additionally, a practice perhaps not emulated widely enough, outside of case law, is the continuous development of "text on text," by which commentaries and interpretations of text become texts to be studied along with the original. Social studies classes, for example, might make productive use of this model.

While most commonplace uses of text are not likely to engender the kind of passionate devotion ascribed to Torah study, it is pleasant to contemplate fostering an attitude toward reading that at least approaches the sentiment described by Holtz (1984) below.

> Ultimately ... the pursuit of Torah is a kind of romance. It fascinates, indeed it may infuriate one with its stubborn difficulties. Yet it remains forever captivating. For the Jewish tradition, reading is more than reading: it is a love affair with the text (p. 29).

References

Goldenberg, R. (1984). Talmud. In B.W. Holtz (Ed.), Back to the sources: Reading the classic Jewish texts (pp. 128-175). New York: Summit Books.

Holtz, B.W. (1984). Introduction: On reading Jewish texts. In B.W. Holtz (Ed.), Back to the sources: Reading the classic Jewish texts (pp. 11-29). New York: Summit Books.

Samuelson, N.M. (1984). Medieval Jewish philosophy. In B.W. Holtz (Ed.), Back to the sources: Reading the classic Jewish texts (pp. 260-303). New York: Summit Books.

Scanlon, D.J., and Duffy, M. (1992, December). Tracing paths of co-constructed knowledge during collaborative dialogues. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Siegel, M. (1992, December). Is reading a transactional process only when reading literature?: Reading mathematics as a counter example. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Steinsaltz, A. (1976). The essential Talmud (C. Galai, Trans.). New York: Basic Books.

Tedmon, S. (1991). Collaborative acts of literacy in a traditional Jewish community (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania). Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International.

Telushkin, J. (1991). Jewish Literacy. New York: William Morrow and Company.

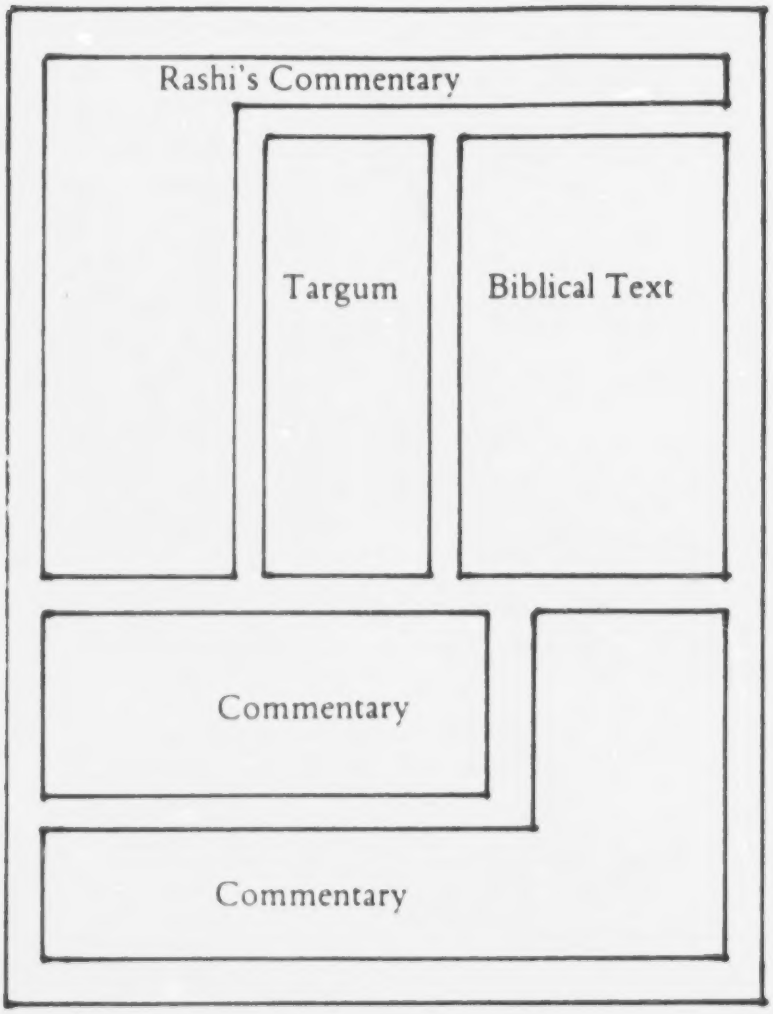

Figure 1. Schematic representation of Torah page.

Figure 2. First page of the Tractate Berakhot, the first part of the Talmud.

COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERIC

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

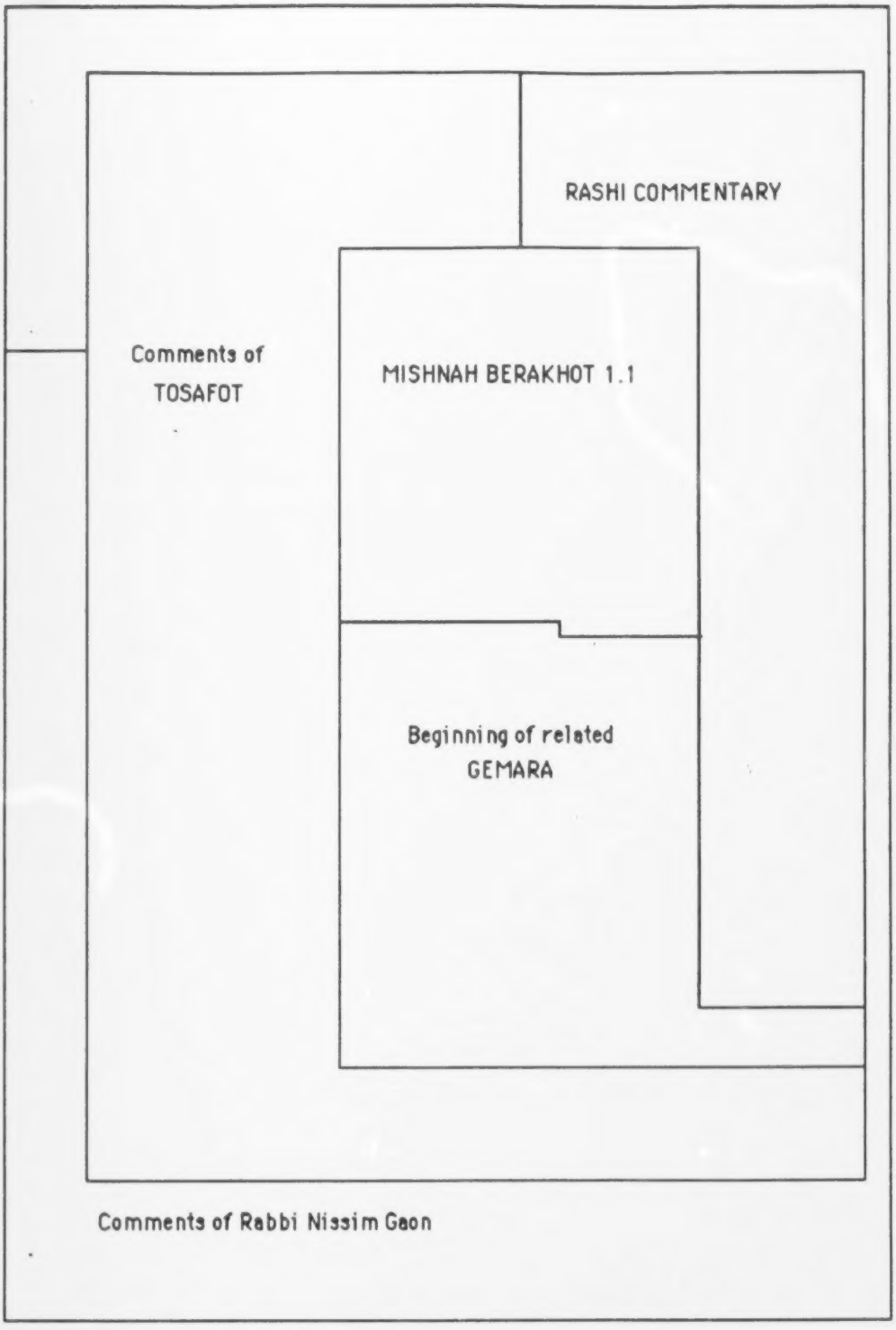

Figure 3. Partial schematic representation of first page of the Tractate Berakhot, the first section of the Mishnah. (Based on Goldenberg, 1984, pp. 141-142.)